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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20505

OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

16 September 1971

MEMORANDUM FOR: Dr. Henry A. Kissinger
Assistant to the President
for National Security Affairs

SUBJECT : Vietnamese Communist Offensive and
Defensive Capabilities with Respect
to Riot Control Agents

1. This is a response to your 11 September request for an assessment of Vietnamese Communist capabilities and practice with respect to riot control agents. (Our comments on the IPMG report on the 1925 Geneva Protocol are being forwarded in a separate memorandum.)

2. North Vietnamese Defensive Capabilities. The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) organized a Chemical Branch in 1958. The NVA's Chemical Defense Battalions seem to have serviceable defensive equipment of Soviet and Chinese Communist design (e.g., gas masks, identification kits, decontamination kits, etc.) but quantities available are limited and such equipment is in short supply. The defensive capabilities of other NVA units are limited. Some crude, ineffective, locally produced masks have been captured from NVA troops infiltrating South Vietnam but so far only a few modern masks of Soviet or Chinese manufacture have been found. From the evidence available, we infer that the defensive capabilities against riot control agents of most NVA units (apart from Chemical Defense Battalions per se) are marginal. Since there have been no signs of any program for issuing masks or identification/decontamination kits to civilians, we would assess North Vietnam's civilian defensive capabilities as negligible.

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3. These defensive capabilities, military and civilian, could of course be improved markedly if Hanoi ever felt an urgent need to improve them. Efficient Chinese and Soviet masks exist and probably could be provided to North Vietnam in significant quantities, if Hanoi ever levied priority requests for them. A shift in manufacturing priorities would probably enable North Vietnam to manufacture on its own masks that would give adequate protection against riot control agents. At the moment, however, we see no signs of any such sense of urgency on this matter and hence do not expect North Vietnam's defensive capabilities to improve markedly in the foreseeable future.

4. Viet Cong Defensive Capabilities. The Viet Cong have little defensive capability against riot control agents. Over the years, Viet Cong defenses have consisted largely of field expedients such as wet gauze masks and goggles whose effectiveness is minimal. There have been isolated cases where Chinese Communist or Soviet gas masks have been captured; but with the single exception of the 100-odd masks captured during Operation CEDAR FALLS in January 1967, masks have been captured one or two at a time. The principal Viet Cong defense against riot agents has generally been that of breaking contact when allied forces have employed CS or CN.

5. The Viet Cong would require North Vietnamese aid and/or Soviet or Chinese equipment to upgrade their defensive capabilities. Out of their own resources, the Viet Cong could not manufacture adequate masks, certainly not in significant quantities.

6. Vietnamese Communist Offensive Use of Riot Control Agents. With one proven exception, all Viet Cong and NVA chemical warfare attacks in South Vietnam have involved the use of captured allied material. In such attacks, Communist forces have sometimes used locally manufactured hand grenades, rifle grenades or mortar rounds; but since North Vietnam is not capable of producing CS, CN or DM (Adamsite), we believe the chemical fillers for the CW ordnance expended in such attacks has come from captured ARVN or U.S. stocks.

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7 The one exception -- or proved anomaly -- occurred on 4 May 1969 in MR 1 (then called I Corps) when a 15-man U.S. Marine ambush patrol was incapacitated by an unknown chemical agent. The five most serious U.S. cases were hospitalized and clinical tests showed them to have extremely low cholinesterase levels, a possible indication that in this instance the Communists had employed some type of nerve agent. The full details of this May 1969 incident are still obscure.

8. In August 1970, the NVA was planning to use chemical warfare in the Communists' 1971 spring (dry season) campaign. Special CW Defense teams were instructing NVA units in March 1971. Although riot control agents were used against isolated ARVN outposts in the late spring of 1971, no widespread Communist tactical use of these agents was reported. To date, in short, Vietnamese Communist use of riot control agents has never been very extensive, but these agents have demonstrably been employed by Communist forces. The agents used have been the ones we use -- mainly CS and CN -- in part because the Communists have relied on capture as a major source of supply.

/s/
Richard Helms
Director

O/DCI/SAVA:GACarver/mee 16Sept71

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